THE PROMISE

February 21, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Mark 1:9-15
Genesis 9:8-17

"I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth." -Genesis 9:13 (RSV)

We closed the house last week. We distributed the furnishings to neighbors and friends, and arranged for the Salvation Army to pick up the rest. We cleared out closets, drawers, basement and attic. And for several days, while we worked, we told the stories to one another... "Remember the time... Mother and Dad were out and I was babysitting... and I put hair color... on your hair... When this tree was planted... you were a baby... Remember when the turtle walked under the space under the porch and into history?"

It is the function of stories to gather up the important issues, the formative events, the giants of the past and to organize them in a coherent pattern. And then the stories must pass it all on so that the hearers begin to understand those issues, events and people and, thereby, to begin to understand who they - the hearers - are. Every culture has big stories which do that - function essentially for the culture in the way those particular stories function in families.

John Updike is one of my favorite story tellers because he presents the critical human issues in the context of life's complexity and ambiguity. They are almost always theological issues as well; but Updike's stories are very human stories. Trust Me is the title of a new volume of short stories and the first one, with that title, is about a man remembering the time his parents took him swimming. He was three or four. This is what he remembers -

"His father, nearly naked, was in the pool, treading water. Harold was standing shivering on the wet tile edge, suspended above the abysmal odor of chlorine, hypnotized by the bright, lapping agitation of this great volume of unnaturally blue-green water. His mother, in a black bathing

suit that made her flesh appear very white, was off in a corner of his mind. His father was asking him to jump. 'C'mon, Hassy, jump,' he was saying, in his mild, encouraging voice. 'It'll be all right. Jump right into my hands.' The words echoed in the flat acoustics of the water and tile and sunlight, heightening Harold's sense of exposure, his awareness of his own white skin. His father seemed eerily stable and calm in the water, and the child idly wondered, as he jumped, what the man was standing on.

Then the blue-green water was all around him, dense and churning, and when he tried to take a breath a fist was shoved into his throat. He saw his own bubbles rising in front of his face, a multitude of them, rising as he sank; he sank it seemed for a very long time, until something located him in the darkening element and seized him by the arm.

He was in air again, on his father's shoulder, still fighting for breath. They were out of the pool."

His father had invited trust, and at the last minute, pulled his waiting arms back, and the boy sank. Perhaps the father was only trying to teach self-reliance, but the little boy never forgot it, ever...

→ That story asks a basic - perhaps the basic - question. Is there something trustworthy? Is there something or someone we can trust absolutely? Is there a God? Is there a God who is involved in the world in a way which makes a difference? It is the question of faith or non-faith, hope or pessimism, freedom or determinism. It is the fundamental, timeless question - belief in God - or comfortable atheism.

With its eloquent symbols of water and the threat of sinking it is very much like one of the oldest stories of our civilization. The Bible begins with stories about creation, the first family, and Cain killing his brother Abel. And then comes the story of Noah, his ark and the animals, two by two... The Noah story asks the question about the world and the human prospect... Is there anything to trust? Is there reason to hope? And what the Noah story expresses is one of the most beautiful and hopeful ideas in all of human history. There is a God who loves the creation and the people of the creation, and that God will not destroy nor abandon the world. That God will not forget the people of the world, and that God wants us to know that and remember it every time the fragile, pastel colors of a rainbow appear in the sky.

The scholars say this story originated around the Sixth Century B.C. and it has a lot of common elements with other religious stories in that era. Ancient people believed the gods controlled nature. The anger of the gods could be seen in floods, earthquakes, lightening. In fact, ancient people lived with dread. A violent thunderstorm suggested the possibility, at least, that the whole system was falling in. An earthquake seemed like evidence that the world was coming apart. There are ancient religious myths which depict God as an archer, shooting lightening bolts at people.

You know the story of Noah and the Ark... God is unhappy with the results of creation. People have turned out to be nasty and violent, so God decides to do what other deities do - namely, end it all, destroy all the life. Except from the start this God is very different. From the

beginning God has second thoughts, makes exceptions - remembers Noah - remembers, in fact, the goodness of the creation, the gorgeous symphony of life he had composed. So this God provides a way out of the dilemma - an Ark to provide for Noah's safety - shuts him and his family in the ark, literally tucks Noah in. When the floods come, after forty days, God remembers Noah. When it is all over, a messenger dove returns to the ark with a green olive leaf to signify the rebirth of life. Noah gets off the ark; God blesses Noah and promises never again to destroy life. The promise is repeated many times - in several forms - almost as if the ancient writer knows that people will forget it...

> "While the earth remains,
> seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
> summer and winter, day and night,
> shall not cease." (8:27)

And then God seals the promise by placing that mythological bow, with which ancient deities attacked people, in the sky, pointed away, arched over the creation God loves so much.

This sermon will have succeeded if it persuades you to go home and read the first nine chapters of Genesis, not as history because it is not history. But as a story which raises basic issues and tells the truth about who we are and who God is. In fact, there is a sense in which the literalists miss the point altogether. The issue is not the flood - or where the ark landed, or how the species survived when the account says the first thing Noah did after he got out of the ark was build an altar and present the clean animals and birds as a burnt offering... Although, after forty and nights cooped up on the ark with them, we can understand how that might have seemed like a good idea to him at the time. Even fastidious John Calvin marveled at Noah and his family's ability to live in the filth and stench. Literalism is a distraction here... It misses the point - which is that God acts in surprising and creative ways to make things work in the world. God can be trusted. God will not abandon or forget his people... ever...

Walter Bruggemann writes: "With amazing boldness the text invites us to penetrate to the heart of God. What we find there is not an angry tyrant but a troubled parent who grieves over the alienation." [Interpretation, Genesis, p. 77]

What we encounter in this story is a God who enters into the separation, becomes part of it, and feels it deeply.

Parents, teachers, lovers and friends know what that is about. Have you noticed how anger with someone you love quickly changes into sadness? The determination to respond in anger, even when it is appropriate, quickly becomes a kind of profound sadness that the relationship is strained. Under the benevolent pressure of love, anger doesn't remain anger but becomes grief. It is not a cliche when parents try to express something of this mystery by saying - "This hurts me more than you."

This is the astonishing assertion the story of Noah makes about God. Unlike all the deities of the ancient world, this God responds to the

creation, becomes sad when things don't go well for the people of creation. In the midst of deciding to take corrective action God begins to change his mind, begins to feel tenderness, compassion; remembers Noah, and parent-like, provides for Noah's safety and future in the midst of the flood. God doesn't forget Noah.

Ancient people aren't the only ones to believe that the gods related to the world essentially in terms of harsh judgment and punishment. If people don't measure up, God will arrange for something awful to happen. That idea has survived over the centuries. I believe it is still near the heart of what many of us believe. We believe that God is offended when we make moral mistakes, or sin; that there is a celestial accounting system and that everyone will get his or hers on the day of reckoning. One of the oldest ideas in history is that justice means someone has to pay for wrongdoing - that God intends it and is not satisfied until the account is balanced. Justice is essentially punishing... This story, however, proposes that God's fundamental posture to us is not punishing but forgiving; God takes on himself the burden of the broken relationship and acts to heal it; God's justice is not retribution but compassion.

When God's mind has changed and a covenant has been given and sealed with a bow in the sky, this story makes one of the loveliest of all affirmations. Namely, God can be trusted: the creation will not turn against us; the harmony of the natural order may be trusted to work for our good; God won't use nature to even the score with us; and we will not be abandoned or forgotten.

The backdrop against which the story of Noah and John Updike's story are written is the basic threat to life. The fragile thread of life, the ever present possibility of non-life... that's what the flood represents. The relevance of the Noah story is that a kind of primal chaos continues to dog us. The story promises that God isn't going to end all life on the planet in a fit of anger. But it leaves the door of human freedom wide open and 2,600 years later, the human race finds that utter non-being, the absolute end of life, is now just a few buttons away from reality.

There is now a new element. God isn't the threat - we are... Walt Kelley's inimitable Pago observation says, "We have met the enemy and they is us." So there is a moral dimension to this covenant. It is that we, its beneficiaries, must live in harmony with the world and all its inhabitants.

In the meantime, God has kept the promise - graciously and magnificently. Lewis Thomas wrote about that gorgeous picture of the earth the astronauts sent back -

"Viewed from the distance of the moon, the astonishing thing about the earth, catching the breath, is that it is alive... Aloft, floating free, beneath the moist membrane of bright, blue sky, is the rising earth, the only exuberant thing in this part of the cosmos." [The Lives of a Cell, p. 170]

Or, as the Genesis writer put it 2,600 years ago -

"While the earth remains,
seedtime and harvest, cold and heat,
summer and winter, day and night,
shall not cease."

God has kept the promise. We haven't done so well. Just this week an item on the editorial page observed that we have managed to "downgrade virtually every form of environmental protection"; the Interior Department has reorganized the Office of Endangered Species out of existence, and there is a question whether or not we will even fund existing laws which strive to "slow down the dazzling rate at which plant and animal species are becoming extinct." [New York Times, 2/17/88]

God has kept the promise and we have responded by continuing to refuse to be responsible for the delicate life systems of air and water and green plants and atmosphere. We have responded by making our national priority the building of an arsenal whose use would end life, all life - weapons whose purpose is not to win wars, but to destroy all life - much more effectively than a forty day flood. That's a theological touch.

"Annihilating power is in nervous and passionate hands," Professor Sittler wrote, and "the stuff is really there to incinerate the earth - and the certainty that it will not be used is not there." [The Care of the Earth, p. 88/89]

Again Lewis Thomas, the botanist, head of Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic, sees it with both moral and scientific objectivity. After several best sellers about the miracle of life, Thomas began to ponder over nuclear dilemma. His book, Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, is devoted to it. That symphony of Mahler's expresses the profound human ecnounter with death and resolves with glorious and majestic power. Thomas wrote... "I cannot listen to the last movement of Mahler's Ninth without the door-smashing intrusion of a huge new thought - death everywhere, the dying of everything."

Thomas wonders how young people can stand it - "those things aimed everywhere, ready for launching." As a hospital administrator he admits, "There is no medical technology that can cope with the certain outcome of just one small, neat, so-called tactical bomb exploded over a battlefield. The doctors of the world know about this. They have known about it since 1945." [Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, p. 165, 166, 83]

So the covenant is finally moral, and, as is often the case, means political. We can't read the Noah story and retreat to the safety of personal piety and our individual salvation. God has kept the promise. The overwhelming priority on the world agenda, and on the agenda of this nation is not the deficit, the availability of abortion, who gets condoms and under what circumstances - important as those issues are... the overwhelming priority is how to live into the future; how to begin the process of returning to harmony, some sanity and some hope.

God is on the side of life. God will not abandon the earth to the forces of destruction. God is the eternal optimist - always responsible

for fresh new green leaves, for hope, for new possibilities springing up out of dismal surroundings. So there is a treaty in front of us. After decades of essentially uninterrupted preparing for war, we may actually soon eliminate 800 missiles. In spite of determined opposition on all sides, the Arias Peace Plan is still alive. Somewhere, out of the deadly chaos of Palestine, there will be hope. People who know about the story of Noah know why and do not hesitate to confess that we live in a world blessed by a covenant: The God who created the world works within the world, bearing its burdens, grieving its alienation, and always pushes and prods, invites and opens the windows of hope and reconciliation. The promise is that God will not abandon the creation. The promise is that God will not forget us, individual people.

God remembered Noah. Updike's little boy grew up wondering why those arms had been withdrawn, perhaps never able to trust again.

Our oldest story assures us that God is trustworthy - God will remember us. We will not be forgotten. As the flood represents the ultimate threat to life in the world, so it represents ultimate threat to each of us. We approach our deepest and most profound question. When we jump, will there be arms to catch us? Is there anything I can trust ultimately? Will anyone remember me when the night is long, the fight is fierce and the darkness threatens?

Our best literature is full of it - the dark night of the human soul when our own mortality is real and the possibility of our being forgotten is immediate. Our best thinkers do not shrink from it.

Paul Tillich wrote -

> "Is there anything that can keep us
> from being forgotten?"

And with the elegant simplicity of the Gospel the great theologian confessed,

> "That we were known from eternity and
> will be remembered in eternity is the
> only certainty..."
> [Bruggemann, op. cit., p. 85
> (Tillich, The Eternal Now, p. 25)]

So we closed the house last week and cleared out the drawers and closets, basement and attic and distributed the furnishings. Then we came to that desk drawer and shoe box full of pictures, which I am sure is in any house. It seemed important to look at each one, and to tell the stories, so that they will not be lost. We lingered over each one and I told all the stories I know... until there was no more time and I thought, "If I don't remember them, who will?" Then I remembered the text I had to return to in Chicago to preach - and the story of Noah...

God will remember them. God will never forget any of them. God will never forget any of us. This is the promise. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Eternal God - of all the mysteries of life - your grace and your love are the most profound.

We thank you God for your promise to keep the world and all its creatures in your heart.

We thank you for your promise never to forget us.

And we thank you for those many ways you have reached into our lives and loved us back into the safety of your care...

O God - in the days of Lent - help us to know anew the depth and strength and power of your lifegiving love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.